From Water to Wine
John 2:1-11
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Of all the situations in which Jesus is portrayed by the Gospel writers, the wedding at Cana is perhaps the most provocative - and one of the most unlikely. Of all the miracles, or mighty deeds, related in the New Testament, this transformation of water into wine is, by far, the strangest and the most difficult for the moder reader.

Everybody has problems with this one. At a base level very few of us are totally comfortable with this whole matter of the "miraculous" in the New Testament. It doesn't correspond with our experience or our understanding of the laws of nature. And yet most of us are sensitive enough to see that it makes no more sense to categorically deny that the miracles happened than it does to blindly and unthinkingly accept them as recorded. We have come to a kind of modus vivendi with the healing mircles. These we can fit into our patterns of thinking, and if we don't understand at least we have a "feel" for their significance. Not so here. This is different - in a fundamental way. This - to use Time Magazine's favorite cliche, "boggles the mind."

One of the ordinary ways of discussing the miracles is to focus on their significance. In a matter of healing, for instance, it is not too difficult to relate the miracle to Jesus' compassion and concern; his reconciling work among men. But you can't use this method here. The only person helped in this instance was the host who apparently hadn't prepared for this many guests. The only affliction relieved was his anxiety and embarrassment at running out of wine. All in all - a relatively trivial matter for God Incarnate to concern himself with.

And if you think we logical Presbyterians have difficulty here, imagine what it must be like for the good ladies of the W. C. T. U. People don't celebrate a wedding by quaffing great quantities of unfermented grape juice. They drank wine - and they drank wine because it added gaity and zest to the occasion. When they ran out Jesus didn't just provide another sip for the celebrants - he provided somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons. That's a lot of wine - and it's all a bit much for the W. C. T. U.

We all have problems with this incident and so we are inclined to ignore it, to pretend it isn't there - which is precisely what I've done in my ministry until now.

Now, let's take another and deeper look. The wedding involved a family which apparently was on intimate terms with the family of our Lord. They were invited guests, but beyond that, Mary seems to have been acquainted with the servants and they with her. When she gave an order, they listened. Wedding celebrations of the day were quite extensive, sometimes lasting as long as a week. The fact that the wine ran out shortly after Jesus and his party arrived indicates that the celebration must have been several days old. When the wine was gone, Mary instructed the servants to fill six stone jars, actually large crocks used by good Jews for ceremonial washing, with water. This done, they took a sample to the steward - who was a kindof Maitre de and Toastmaster. By the time he tasted it - it was wine, - good wine. The custom was to serve the best wine first - and the fact that this was better than any drunk this far was a matter of some surprise to the steward. He commented on this fact and the Gospel writer concludes the account with the observation: "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory: and his disciples believed in him."

Some scholars make much out of the fact that the account does not actually say that Jesus turned the water into wine - only that the water becam e wine. An interesting observation, the significance of which eludes me.

In any event, that's the story and it seems to me the contemporary reader has at least two different methods at his disposal for interpretation. The first, of course, is the literal approach. That is, the event happened exactly as described and there is no other intentional significance other than that which is clearly defined. The literalist assumes that this is all the author had in mind and cites the obvious literary effort to nail the event down in terms of time and place. Such positive, factual statements as "on the third day", "in Cana of Galilee", "the mother of Jesus was there", seem to infer that the author is trying to document explicitly an historical occurrence. That much is clear, but if we play the game by this particular set of rules, some glaring deficiencies become apparent. In the first place, in that day when protocol and etiquette were rather important, it is odd that a host would make such a gross miscalculation when preparing for a party. In the secon place - 120 gallons is an enormous quantity of wine. In the third place this miracle is totally different from all the others. There is nothing here that relates to Jesus' ministry of compassion. Fourth - there is an air of unreality about the entire account, such as the strange conversation between Jesus and his mother when he said, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come?" Thus the literal approach and its struggles and weaknesses.

The other interpretative approach may be called allegorical. That is to say, the author had no intention of describing an actual event, but rather used an event as the contextual framework for the purpose of telling a story. Perhaps there was a wedding early in Jesus' ministry. Perhaps it was an event of some significance for the disciples. Perhaps the author used the event to express his primary point - that Jesus of Nazareth was, in fact, the divine Son of God.

Like the literal approach there is much to be said both for and against this method. In the first place, if the author's intent was to use symbolism, why didn't he raise some kind of warning flag? And yet this method has some very strong points to commend it. Particularly the image of old wine and new wine reminds us of other instances in the New Testament. The water jars - symbolic of the ritualistic law of Judaism - now full of fresh wine - may be more than coincidental.

On it goes, and in the final analysis every individual must make up his own mind regarding an approach to this particular text. No one was there taking notes; Jesus had no official biographer recording his every word and deed for posterity. What we have are religious tracts filtered through the intelligence, world view and literary sensitivity of men who believed Jesus was the Christ. Their writings contain God's word for this and every age. They do not contain a biography. And so I would suggest that here, and in other instances of Biblical difficulty, the really important matter is not whether the events happened precisely as described, but what the author was trying to communicate when he described the events as he did. "What did he mean? What does the text mean for us?" These are the real questions for the modern reader of the Biblical record: - not "Did it really happen lick this?"

This done, however, our difficulties with this text are far from over. Even after we've bypassed the question of historic accuracy, the meaning of the text is still not immediately evident.

I would suggest, for your consideration, three meanings.

First, I believe it both edifying and significant that the one we know as Lord was invited to and participated in a joyous celebration, an event that would be condemned by many of his contemporary followers as a worldly, sinful affair. I think the story is significant because it portrays

a "worldly" Christ, that is; a man without the neurotic dichotomy between the holy and the secular that characterizes other "religious" men. I think the story is significant because it portrays an immensely appealing Christ who went out of his way to share in the great joy of one of his friends.

How often have you done likewise? We well understand Jesus Christ as "the man of sorrows". All of us have experienced the comfort in a time of grief that comes from knowing our Lord knows our predicament and shares it with us. Most of us, moved by this authentic comfort, have tried, in some way, to communicate it to and share it with someone else. But how about when a friend experiences great joy? Is there anything about our faith that has to do with this?

I think there is: and I think we don't know much about it. Historically we Christians have always felt a little guilty about having a good time. The Church, down through the years, has allowed the power of God to operate within it in times of adversity: but in good times we are inclined to feel we must be doing something wrong. And so we come across to the world as a pompous institution, staid, boring, morose: and our worship experience, which initially was a celebration of the Resurrection, has become an ordeal to be endured.

This runs deeply in the collective Christian conscience, and I firmly believe we miss the relevance of the Gospel when we get caught in it.

Our Lord was one who knew the beauty of human joy. He was one who knew the importance of sharing - not only the low points, the dark valleys of human experience - but also the mountain-tops. And so he went to a wedding feast, and he celebrated. That ought to tell us - too - that he shares our sorrows and disappointments - but also our victories; that laughter is as blessed as tears: that the good times of life are full of the very grace of God.

Second, and not unrelated to the first meaning - is the fact that the celebration he graced was a wedding. I believe the presence of Jesus Christ at the wedding feast in Cana is significant for an understanding of marriage. The event is invoked in every Christian wedding. We remember that his ministry began at such an event. We remember that marriage is a religious covenant, not just a legal contract, and that Jesus Christ is present even in the most intimate relationships between a man and a woman.

Third, and perhaps tmost important, this incident means that the work Jesus Christ came to do among men can be understood primarily as "transformation". At the wedding the old wine was gone, and Jesus transformed water into something even better than the old. Whether or not the author intended it, this is exactly what he did with the religion of Judaism. On one occasion he even referred to the religion of the Pharisees as old wine - and suggested that the container - the skin - would break if the new wine of the Gospel were poured in.

The affect of Jesus Christ, for those who followed him, was transforming. He changed their institutions: in the place of the dead letter of the law he gave them the grace of living in freedom and responsibility. And out of the old Israel came the new. To those who believed he gave new life - new lives; to broken man, immoral men, poor men, hated men - he gave new life.

We don't know much about the "transforming" Lord. You and I have the

audacity to come before him feeling that we are all we can become: feeling secure and comfortable and inoculated against change. And this story calls us up short.

The water he changed, you will remember, was for the sake of purification. As such it stood for all the ritual of religion. It was this he transformed into zestful, delicious wine.

The incident leaves a question in my mind, and I would share it with you. Is our Christian faith like that water - or that wine? Are we, as Christians, more concerned with the commonly accepted rites of religiosity, or are we concerned with living joyful, authentic lives.

Jesus Christ can transform us; our lives; even our religion. Life can be, in Hemingway's words, "A Moveable Feast". That is the promise of the Gospel. And it is good news indeed!

Amen.